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(In)efficacy of Words and Images in Sixteenth-Century Franciscan Missions in

Mesoamerica - Semiotic Features and Cultural Consequences.

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Abstract: Franciscan missionaries in sixteenth-century Mesoamerica created non-verbal means of evangelization based on both the entextualization of analogous means already adopted in European internal missions and on the adoption of local expressive devices for the communication of Christian contents. Two instances of such entextualization/hybridization are analyzed: Pedro de Gante's pictographic catechism and Diego Valadés's *Rhetorica Christiana*. The efficacy of such means must be measured not in the local context of Mesoamerican sixteenth-century Christian missions, but in the global framework of early-modern Christianity, where pre-modern conceptions about the universality and the efficacy of the Christian message were both shaken, respectively by the European expansion in the non-Christian world and by Christian theological debates about the status of non-verbal signs in religious practices. The creation of such missionary means of non-verbal communication both embodied and promoted the semiotic ideology of modernity, essentially centered on the idea of mutual independence between the material and the conceptual part of signs. Studying and analyzing these means and their historical and cultural contexts might be helpful in disentangling the contradictions that such semiotic ideology brought about in late-modern post-colonial societies.

Key-words: Early-modern Franciscan missions, missionary communication, non-verbal communication, entextualization, semiotic ideology

1. Pedro de Gante's Entextualization.

Pieter van der Moere, referred to by Spanish sources as “Pedro de Gante” or “Pedro de Mura,” was born near Ghent, in Spanish Flanders, about 1490, entered the Franciscan Order, and was chosen by another Flemish Franciscan, known in Spanish sources as Juan Glapión, as one of the three members of the very first Christian mission to Mesoamerica.

Pedro de Gante and his two companions left the convent of Saint Francis, in Ghent, on 27 April, 1522 and, after a one-year stay in Madrid, departed from Spain on 31 May, 1523; they arrived in what is now Mexico, on the coast of Veracruz, on August 13. Thanks to Pedro de Gante’s letters (Gante, *Carta*), the unfolding of his evangelization activities in Mesoamerica can be at least partially reconstructed. Apparently, soon upon their arrival the three Flemish missionaries realized that conditions of life in Tenochtitlan were too harsh. They therefore moved to Texcoco, where they were hosted in the house of Hernando Ixtlixochitl, the governor of the city and a faithful ally of Cortés. Here they started to struggle with the difficult task of learning local languages. After the arrival of the “twelve”¹ friars led by Martín de Valencia and the establishment of the Franciscan college of San Francisco de México, Pedro de Gante moved to this city, where he was to dedicate all his life to the first missionary school of Mesoamerica.

Since his first arrival in the Americas, Pedro de Gante distinguished himself for the semiotic inventiveness by which, mostly blending European didactic methods with some elements of Mesoamerican culture, he tried to overcome the linguistic obstacles for the evangelization of the natives. First of all, he focused on the cultural and religious education of children as a way to bring about the transformation of a whole society: given the multiplicity of Mesoamerican languages, a great obstacle for missionary work, children of noble families could work as interpreters between the Catholic friars and their audience. Second, Pedro de Gante tried to enhance the efficacy of verbal communication through other expressive devices, such as music, theater, and painting (Edgerton).

As in Europe the Catholic Church was “converting” the profane forms of classic and chivalric epics into devices of spiritual persuasion (Leone, *Saints*), so Catholic missionaries in Mesoamerica were “converting” the pre-Christian ways of belief into elements of Catholic devotion, involving several semiotic substances² (Ricard).

It was in the elaboration of some visual methods of religious persuasion that Pedro de Gante made the most significant contribution to the evangelization of the Americas and, through his disciple Diego Valadés, also to the re-evangelization of the internal missions of Europe. Most probably, Pedro de Gante had been exposed to the rich iconography of early-modern Catholicism in his native Flanders, at that time one of the most important centers for the production of Christian art. There he had probably learned how to draw and paint. Once in Mesoamerica, faced with the difficulty of not knowing the local languages, and having realized that images were very important not only in many Mesoamerican pictographic systems of writing, but also in the transmission of traditional beliefs, he elaborated a visual method of religious communication. Unfortunately, none of the canvases used by Pedro de Gante and his companions remains, but some both written and visual sources attest to these semiotic inventions (Rodríguez Gutiérrez de Ceballos 98; Sebastián, *El barroco* and *Iconografía*). Visual sources will be dealt with later; as regards written sources, here is what Torquemada writes about this subject:

“Tuvieron estos benditos padres un modo de predicar no menos trabajoso que artificioso, y muy provechoso para estos indios por ser conforme al uso que ellos tenían de tratar todas las cosas por pinturas, y era desta manera: hacían pintar en un lienzo los artículos de la fé, y en otro los diez mandamientos de Dios, y en otro los siete sacramentos y lo demás que querían de la doctrina cristiana, y cuando el predicador quería predicar de los mandamientos colgaban junto de donde se ponía a predicar el

lienzo de los mandamientos, en distancia que podía con una vara señalar la parte del lienzo que quería, y así les iba declarando los misterios que contenía y la voluntad de Dios que en ellos se cifra y encierra. Lo mismo hacía cuando quería predicar de los artículos, colgando el lienzo en que estaban pintados; y desta manera se les declaró clara y distintamente y muy a su modo toda la doctrina cristiana” (Torquemada 1, 112; “These blessed fathers had an effective and ingenious way of preaching, very suitable for these Indians, for it was in conformity with their custom of dealing with everything through paintings, and such it was: they [the fathers] would have the articles of faith painted on a canvas, and the ten commandments of God in another canvas, and the seven sacraments in another one and everything they wanted to communicate about the Christian doctrine, and when the preacher wanted to talk about the commandments, they would hang the canvas of the commandments right where he was to preach, at such a distance that he could point with a stick the part of the canvas that he wanted, while he was declaring the mysteries that it depicted and the will of God that was coded and enshrined in the canvas. He would do the same when he wanted to preach about the articles of faith, hanging the canvas where they were painted; and the Christian doctrine would be clearly and distinctly declared to them, in a very peculiar way.”)³

Christian preachers had used images as a support to verbal preaching since the Middle Ages, and even before (Bolzoni). Yet, Pedro de Gante and his companions were the first ones to adapt this method to the visual culture of Mesoamerican natives. Maybe for the first time in the history of European visual culture, they were given an opportunity to realize that images too, like words, obey rules that change according to cultural contexts.

In no other “semiotic invention” is this as evident, probably, as in Pedro de Gante’s pictographic catechism, which was meant to transmit the main tenets of Christianity through a

semiotic system familiar to the natives of Mesoamerica (Carceles Laborde). A copy of it, known as the *Catecismo de Pedro de Gante*, is in the Spanish National Library (Gante, *Catecismo*). It is composed of forty-four leaves (eighty-eight pages), measuring on average 7.7 x 5.3 cm. Pictograms are executed on pale beige paper, of European origin. Four colors were used by Pedro de Gante: red, yellow, navy blue, and green. The manuscript is signed “Pedro de Gante.” It is impossible to date this document precisely, which was certainly made between Pedro de Gante’s arrival to Mesoamerica and his death. In composing the pictograms of his catechism, Pedro de Gante was influenced by Aztec writing, and in particular by the pictograms of *tlacuiloque*⁴, but also by some European visual sources, such as the *Biblia pauperum*⁵ and the *Speculum humanæ salvationis*⁶.

According to the deciphering of this catechism proposed by Cortés Castellano, Gante’s pictograms intended to transpose into images the instructions to make the sign of the cross, and to recite the main prayers of the Christian liturgy. Here is the visual transposition of the prayer which missionaries had the Mesoamerican natives recite during their confession (fig. 1):



Fig. 1

Pictograms must be read from left to right. Each page is divided into five parallel strips, each containing three pictograms. Most probably, this catechism was presented open to the natives, for pictograms are disposed in such a way that they must be read by six, from the first one on the left page until the last one on the right page. Pictogram number two hundred and thirteen of Pedro de Gante's catechism marks the beginning of the prayer of confession and repentance.

It is difficult, if not impossible, to ascertain how effective this visual method was. However, what interests the present article is that the semiotic attitude that was behind its elaboration, diffusion, and usage was similar to the semiotic attitude that was behind the communicative experiments of Catholic Reformation in its internal missions. In Europe as well as in the Americas, the Church realized that the old modalities of evangelization, shaped throughout the Middle Ages, were not effective anymore, jeopardized by the absence of a common linguistic ground in the Americas, by the absence of a common cultural and spiritual ground in Europe. In order to dispel the ghost of a failed evangelization of the world, early-modern Catholic missionaries brought about strategies of religious persuasion based on what current linguistic anthropology calls "entextualization," the idea that "chunks of discourse come to be extractable from particular contexts and thereby made portable. [...] These chunks of discourse, or 'texts' can thereby circulate and be recontextualized, inserted into new contexts." (Keane 14) However, the entextualization of Catholicism put forward by Pedro de Gante was not neutral at all: it implied a semiotic ideology according to which Mesoamerican pictograms could be "culturalized," detached from their traditional religious content and used as independent expressive forms, able to convey the religious content of Christianity. The extent to which this portability of the early-modern Catholic message was related to a semiotic ideology claiming the mutual independence of signifying and signified is even more evident in the semiotic inventions elaborated by Pedro de Gante's pupil, Diego Valadés.

2. Diego Valadés's Semiotic Ideology.

Diego Valadés was born in Tlaxcala, present-day Mexico, in 1533, to a Mesoamerican mother and a *conquistador* father. Raised by Pedro de Gante at the Franciscan school of San Francisco de México, he learned, among other skills, drawing and painting. In 1548 he entered the novitiate of the Provincia Franciscana del Santo Evangelio, where he perfected his spiritual training. After becoming a Franciscan in 1550, he carried on some philosophical and theological studies in the Convent of Saint Francis at Santiago Tlatelolco and was ordained a priest in 1555. Since his youth, he demonstrated a remarkable linguistic ability, probably due to his family background: he was able to speak Nahuatl, Otomi, and Tarascan. In 1571 Valadés was one of the first natives of the Americas to cross the Atlantic Ocean from West to East; he went first to Spain, then to Paris, and finally to Rome, where in 1575 he entered the chapter of the Franciscan Order. Unexpectedly elected general procurer, he was going to keep his charge for four years, but on 10 May, 1577 Philip II, king of Spain, suddenly dismissed him. During his stay in Rome, Valadés wrote his most important work, *Rhetorica Christiana* (Valadés). The last evidence of his presence in the early-modern world is dated 8 February, 1582 (Palomera Esteban and Vazquez Janeiro).

For the purposes of the present article, what is interesting about Valadés's *Rhetorica Christiana* is not its subject: Valadés's rhetoric, indeed, deeply inspired by Luis de Granada's *Ecclesiasticæ rhetoricæ* (Granada), simply reinterprets Cicero's rhetoric in the light of the Council of Trent. What matters in *Rhetorica Christiana* is, on the contrary, its method, i.e. Valadés's intention to shape and diffuse some visual devices for the evangelization and religious conversion of the illiterates.

Rhetorica Christiana contains twenty-seven copper engravings; eight of them are signed with the initials "VAS" intertwined; an engraving is signed "*F.D. Valadés*," another one "*F.D.*

Valadés inventor;” the remaining engravings are signed “*F. Didacus fecit.*” There is no doubt then that all twenty-seven engravings were executed by Valadés himself. A detailed semiotic analysis of these images cannot be proposed within the limits of the present article. Yet, some of these engravings deserve close attention, since they are a fundamental visual source about the history of didactic initiatives carried on by missionaries in the Americas and about the relation between these initiatives and those taking place in the internal missions of Europe.

Page one hundred and seven is entirely occupied by the following engraving (number eighteen) (fig. 2):

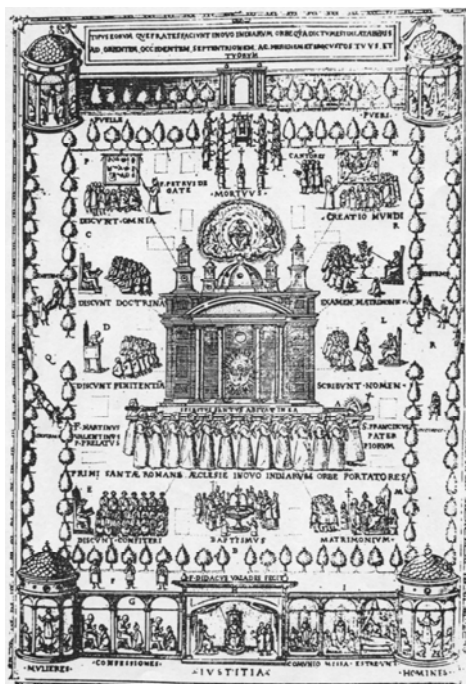


Fig. 2

As in other previous or subsequent engravings, Valadés tends to use the entire space of the page, the entire space of the engraving, in order to display, through a sort of diagram, the main aspects of a certain subject. This engraving, in particular, contains a schematic visualization of how missionaries would organize their work of evangelization in the

Americas; at the same time, it proposes an iconic interpretation of both the religious and the semiotic ideology behind this work. In the center of the engraving, fourteen friars carry on their shoulders, as in a procession, a symbolic representation of the Church of Rome, surmounted by an image of the Trinity; Saint Francis is at the head of the group, whilst Martín de Valencia is at the back of it. The façade of the church carried by the Franciscans strikingly reminds one of the Basilica of Saint Peter in Rome, which Valadés certainly had the opportunity to see during his stay in Italy. From the central columns of the pronaon, the dove of the Holy Spirit sends the rays of its grace toward the four corners of the engraving, which are also the four corners of the Franciscan mission. Some aspects of this visual representation are particularly relevant in the frame of the present article: in the top-right corner, within the internal range of trees, Pedro de Gante is represented while he teaches the Mesoamerican natives by pointing with a stick at a sort of blackboard, where a series of tiny symbols are on display. Similarly, in the top-left corner another friar is represented while he exposes the Christian views on the creation of the world to the natives of Mesoamerica, always using the same method of pointing with a stick at a painting. The meaning of the engraving could not be clearer: missionaries invent, adopt, and diffuse new methods for the evangelization of the natives, yet these new methods are considered a direct emanation of the Holy Spirit, through the intermediation of the Church of Rome. In his *Rhetorica Christiana*, indeed, Valadés intention was not only to familiarize Europe, and especially new potential missionaries, with the pastoral techniques brevetted in the Americas by the Franciscans, but also to reassure the Catholic hierarchy that these techniques would be entirely consistent with the religious doctrine of the Church of Rome.

In the following engraving of Valadés's *Rhetorica Christiana*, a Franciscan friar is represented while he preaches to a crowd of natives by pointing with a long stick at a series of images, representing the central moments of Jesus's Passion (fig. 3):



Fig. 3

In the first row of this Mesoamerican audience Valadés's represents a nobleman, who manifests the effect of the sermon on his soul by a typical gesture of contrition⁷: he touches his chest with his right hand. The image therefore underlines the spiritual effectiveness of the method "invented" by Pedro de Gante, but also the coincidence between the Christian orator and the Christian painter, already emphasized by the most important theoreticians of Christian art after the Council of Trent (undoubtedly, early-modern Franciscan sources tend to emphasize the effectiveness of these methods and to downplay their shortcomings – as argued by Alcántara-Rojas).

Diego Valadés's *Rhetorica Christiana* tries to demonstrate the efficacy of images as communicative devices for the religious evangelization, persuasion, and conversion of the natives of Mesoamerica, but also for those Europeans the Catholic Church was no longer able to reach through purely verbal communication. However, it is necessary to question the nature

of this efficacy. Were Pedro de Gante's and Valadés's images really as efficacious as they claimed them to be?

If the efficacy of these images is to be measured in terms of how many Mesoamerican souls were converted, there is no answer to this question, first of all because sources that describe this kind of efficacy are systematically biased, and second of all because even in Pedro de Gante's time missionaries had no means to ascertain the truthfulness of religious conversions obtained through visual predication.

The final argument this paper would like to propose is that the efficacy of these semiotic inventions, the fruitfulness of these entextualizations, must be conceived of with reference to the semiotic ideology of early-modern Catholicism.

3. Cultural Consequences.

Indeed, if any efficacy whatsoever must be attributed to Pedro de Gante's pictographic catechism or to the engravings of his pupil Diego Valadés's *Rhetorica Christiana*, it is the efficacy to persuade early-modern Christian culture—in general—about the universality, and therefore the portability, of the Evangelical message, and to convince early-modern Catholic culture—in particular—about the value of non verbal devices, and especially images, for the expression and the propagation of that message.

The first belief, that of the universality of the Christian message, had been shaken during the early-modern colonial expansion of Europe throughout the world, and the consequent, shocking experience that, despite the miraculous event of the Pentecost, entire populations of the world had not been reached by the predication of the Apostles. Pedro de Gante's and Diego Valadés's semiotic experiments were a demonstration of the fact that, although the natives of the Americas apparently looked so distant from the European civilization as to encourage some to consider them as non-human, the force of the Christian

message was such that it could be effectively transmitted to them, it could be effectively entextualized, arousing the sparkle of truth deposited in their souls by divine grace. Such was the paradoxical nature of the missionary endeavor: on the one hand, it was based on the idea of the superiority of the Christian faith over the “idolatries” of the natives, an idea that frequently brought about violence as a way to impose such superiority; on the other hand, though, the missionary endeavor implicitly affirmed the common humanity of both missionaries and natives, so paving the way for later developments, including the recognition of the universality of human rights.

The second belief, that of the possibility of expressing the Christian message not only through the words of the New Testament or those of predication, but also through other semiotic substances, such as the body of the saints, the iconicity of images, the musicality of chants, the theatricality of performance, had been harshly attacked by Protestant religious leaders, and especially by Calvinists. This contrast can be reframed as stemming from a different attribution of agency: to Calvinists, the Catholic way of considering relics, images, chants, theater, etc. consisted in a wrong attribution of agency, dangerously giving rise to forms of fetishism; to Calvinists, Catholics were dispossessing God of his supreme agency in order to empower mere objects. As a consequence, Pedro de Gante’s pictographic catechism and Diego Valadés’s engravings were a suitable occasion to demonstrate to European Christians that: 1) images could be used to spread the Christian message throughout the world, and were perfectly able to transpose it without polluting the communication between God and human beings through the grace of the Holy Spirit and the mediation of the Catholic Church; and that 2) if a wrong attribution of agency was to be eliminated, this depended on the content of visual communication, and not on its form; Mesoamerican traditional religious pictograms should be destroyed, since they attributed agency to a false divinity, but pictographic language as such should be preserved and treasured as a communicative device

able to persuade Mesoamerican natives that that same agency should be attributed to the Christian God.

It is no coincidence that both Pedro de Gante's pictographic catechism and Diego Valadés's *Rhetorica Christiana* enjoyed a wide circulation and acclaim in European libraries, maybe even wider than they did in the Americas: their efficacy precisely consisted in countering the iconoclastic tendencies of early-modern Christian Europe and in demonstrating the Catholic thesis that the communication of Christianity was not to be exclusively enshrined in words.

Conclusions.

It is only through conceiving the efficacy of these semiotic experiments not in their local cultural context, namely in relation to local missionary goals, but in their global cultural context, namely in relation to the complex interplay between Christian religious conflicts within Europe on the one hand and the Christian expansion outside Europe on the other hand, that one can realize how non-verbal devices of religious persuasion adopted by early-modern Franciscan missionaries in Mesoamerica were the product of a semiotic ideology that was going to have long-lasting consequences in the development of modernity, including the development of modern semiotics. This ideology, according to which contents can be separated from their traditional forms, and associated with other forms, stripped in their turn of their traditional contents, is exactly the same ideology that the current crisis of modernity is questioning more and more: on the one hand, present-day societies are increasingly claiming the inseparableness of forms and contents, so emphasizing the legacy of local cultures; on the other hand, such a claim is jeopardizing that belief in a common humanity that was, after all, behind the endeavor of missionary evangelization. If the study of the efficacy of words and

images at the beginning of modernity has a purpose, it probably consists in helping us to understand the origin of, and possibly to envisage the solution to, such a cultural tangle.

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Captions

- Fig. 1: Pedro de Gante [Pieter van der Moere] (probably 1490 –1572). Pictograms 213-333 from Pedro de Gante's *Catecismo*, depicting the beginning of the prayer of confession. 1523-1572. Ink on paper, 7,7 x 5,3 cm. Madrid: National Library of Spain, MS Vit., 26-29. Photograph by the author.
- Fig. 2 and 3: Diego Valadés (1533 – after 1582). Copper engravings n. 18 and 19 from *Rhetorica Christiana* (Valadés 1579). In-quarto. Copy belonging to the author of the present article.

¹ According to most Spanish sources, the friars who initiated the evangelization of Mesoamerica were twelve; cfr Benavente. However, the choice of this number might have been determined by the desire to create a symbolic parallel with the number of the Apostles.

² According to Hjelmslev's semiotic theory, a sign is composed by two planes, expression and content, which are, in turn, composed of three strata, matter, form, and substance. "Expressive substance" therefore designates the matter of the expression of a sign (for instance pigments, sounds, bodily movements), after it has been shaped by a certain cultural form (for instance into pictograms, phonemes, gestures); cfr. Hjelmslev.

³ Translation by the author of the present article.

⁴ *Tlacuiloque* [many scholars translate this term as “legal artists”], held in high esteem by both the governors and the population, were specialized in a specific domain of representation (for it was impossible to master the entire repertory of pictograms). They would paint their paintings on paper (of animal - *amatl*, *mazatl* - or vegetal origin - *ichcatl*, cotton), using several colors, mostly of animal origin. The pictograms of *tlacuiloque* were not meant to induce in receivers an aesthetic reaction, but to transmit a personal interpretation of a thought, of the action of an individual or a community, in a given moment of its historical evolution. They were mostly used as a support for teaching. When the Spanish conquistadores arrived in Mesoamerica, it seems that the writing system of the natives was about to change from pictographic into phonetic. Pedro de Gante probably had the occasion to consult some *amoxтли*, i.e., some pictographic manuscripts done before the conquest, and even to penetrate in some *amoxcalli*, the ‘libraries’ usually annexed to temples and educational centers (*calmecac* and *telpochcalli*). The majority of these manuscripts had been destroyed by the king Itzcoatl (ruled between 1427 and 1440), following an iconoclastic suggestion of his prime minister Tlacaelel (León-Portilla); some other manuscripts were destroyed during the siege of Tenochtitlan, some after the conquest, often by suggestion of the Catholic missionaries.

⁵ The *Biblia pauperum* (“Paupers’ Bible”) was a tradition of picture Bibles beginning in the later Middle Ages, meant to portray the historical books of the Bible visually.

⁶ The *Speculum Humanae Salvationis* or *Mirror of Human Salvation* was a bestselling anonymous illustrated work of popular theology in the late Middle Ages.

⁷ This gesture is systematically associated with contrition in 16th- and 17th-century Catholic iconography; cfr Leone, *Religious* and Leone, *Saints*.